

Toward a Feminist Reading of Herman Melville's Stories About the Material Conditions of Writing

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Feminist criticism contributes a stimulating, if still compact, scholarship in the field of Melville studies. The past three decades of feminist study have not only revisited questions of Melville and misogyny, but also renewed interest in his short fiction, poetry, and *Pierre*; opened up multiple significances of gendered figures in his texts; reconsidered his career through new historical models of authorship; and more. This year's MLA panel provided the occasion to extend the inquiry in a range of approaches that address a range of texts.

Heather Levy shows the importance of continued feminist critique and careful reading to distinguish where Melville's writing may escape social hierarchies and where it remains embedded in his era's structures of inequality. Her study of *Redburn* takes Melville at his word in pointing up a commercial motive behind the novel's conformations to an inequitable social system and resultant shortfalls of human solidarity. Virginia Engholm extends the feminist project of literary recovery and recuperation of the sentimental mode. Her comparison of *Pierre* and *Violet* aims to enlarge understanding of antebellum genre and family formation, as well as to deepen appreciation of Melville's novel along with that of the fiction of his fellow New Yorker, Maria McIntosh. Rodrigo Andrés frames a materialist feminist reading of Melville's short fiction in biographical analysis. With a sympathetic understanding of uneven antebellum gender configurations, he tallies some of the costs of male privilege, material and status costs for women, as well as psychological costs for both women and men, and traces these in the literary and psychological structuring of Melville's stories. Ellen Weinauer provided a response that, together with the panelists' papers, illustrated some of the many interesting, vital things that a feminist might do with Melville.

Elizabeth Hardwick optimistically suggests that "throughout Melville's writing there is a liberality of mind, a freedom from tribal superstition, a rejection of superiority of race or nation" (xvii). Hardwick emphasizes Wellingborough's indignant assessment of the failure of Americans to carry out the principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence. *Redburn* does express egalitarian impulses about race and class, but they are only momentary asides rather than the heart of Melville's Bildungsroman. Although *Redburn* was written one year after Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott first proposed votes for women at the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Conference, it does not contain egalitarian impulses toward women of any race or class. *Redburn* offers the feminist reader contrived tropes of womanhood, including the dutiful and sentimental mother who knits mittens and mends trousers, the devoted but ineffectual sisters, an emaciated mother with her child in a pawn shop, and the generous wife Mrs. Jones with her heaping plates of maternal pudding.

Once Wellingborough sets out to sea, the circle of standard tropes is only slightly widened to encompass an eccentric old black fortune teller De Squak, "hoydenish nymphs," the sentimental daughter of the dock master, hopelessly domesticated wives who unwittingly

participate in the roguish bigamy of their husband Max, Handsome Mary who tearfully accepts beatings from her laggardly husband, avaricious female prostitutes, the beautiful daughters of an English farmer with whom Wellingborough becomes smitten, and upper class ladies who scornfully offer pennies to the most woeful Irish emigrants. Hardwick characterizes Wellingborough's encounter with the starving mother and her beleaguered children who have crept off to die in an old factory warehouse cellar in *Launcelott's-Boy* as "a scene of tragic extremity, last rites for a street burial, a moment of perfect human sympathy" (xvii). Wellingborough does try to intercede on their behalf but cannot convince authorities to assist them. There are no last rites for the starving mother and her neglected children. Lime merely covers stench.

It is an emblem of ruthless practicality that even more painfully underscores the failure of Wellingborough's attempts at compassion. The feminist reader cannot help noticing that there is a lexicon of human worth in *Redburn*. Jackson, the detested and lazy sailor falls from the rigging to his death at the end of the voyage, a drunken sailor spontaneously combusts in his fetid berth (qtd. in Bernard 349), women on both sides of the Atlantic are beaten but stay in their marriages, and the bodies of the hapless mother and her starving children are first destroyed by neglect and then tidied over by a public willing to offer only lime. Compassion is a reluctant impulse for Wellingborough. He is willing to hide his sexual and emotional desires for Harry Bolton and Carlo, the Italian singer. His ability to turn his poignant encounters with the poor, Blacks, Jews, Irish immigrants, and homosexuals into convenient and lyrical emblems ensures his survival and the commercial success of *Redburn*. Love Will Keep Us Together: Sentimentalism and the Problem of Incest in Melville's *Pierre* and Maria McIntosh's *Violet* Virginia B. Engholm University of Kentucky Cindy Weinstein's important recent book *Family, Kinship, and Sym-path-y in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* addresses one of the most debated issues in the study of Herman Melville's *Pierre*, that of or not the novel can be considered sentimental. She points out that many critics see the novel's inability to "generate contractual relations," what she argues convincingly is a central concern of the genre, as evidence that the novel is more a derisive comment on or subversive mockery of the conventions of sentimental fiction than a genuine engagement with them (159).

Although she asserts that this failure does separate *Pierre* from other sentimental novels, she argues that *Pierre* retains some element of the sentimental in that Melville's novel is in fact a precursor to it, a sentimental novel that never quite gets going. My intervention in this debate comes through reclamation of *Pierre* as a sentimental novel that, contrary to Weinstein's argument, works very much within the genre of sentimentalism.

Whereas Weinstein views *Pierre*'s inability to regenerate familial bonds based on affection as a failure and consequently locates *Pierre* as related to, but not part of, the genre itself, I contend that this failure is in fact symptomatic of the larger project of sentimentalism. At stake, particularly for feminist critics of both Melville and sentimentalism, is the way in which this inability to reestablish familial bonds outside the boundaries of consanguinity is viewed as evidence of Melville's unwillingness or inability to write a sentimental novel, or more to the point, the way in which he is viewed as able to escape the "ideological and characterological problems of sentimental fictions" (159). Placing *Pierre* side by side with Maria McIntosh's widely read but critically neglected novel *Violet*, which also explores the limitations of sentimental novels' reimaginings of the family, helps to illustrate that even

while Melville pushed against the limits of the sentimental novel's drive to create a new vision of the family, he hardly did so alone. McIntosh's Violet also puts pressure on the dictate of these novels that affinity and sympathy would solve the problems of consanguinity. Its plot, which centers on the traditional narrative wherein the young, orphaned girl is adopted by successive families, brings in the problem of incest overtly (where most sentimental novels only deal with it implicitly) by having the final family that adopts her as "their own daughter" actually be her biological family. The heroine must literally escape the threat of incest, as her adoptive father wants her to marry her biological brother. I argue that *Pierre* and *Violet*, when read together, show the extent to which the notion of the reconstructed family carried within its very structure the problem of incest. My argument makes clear that Melville's inability to imagine the family as bound by affection and choice rather than consanguinity does not deny him the status of a sentimental writer and indeed places him squarely within the genre's bounds.

Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) and "The Tartarus of Maids" (1855) both may be read as explorations of the gendered dimension of the job of the scrivener, that is, the copyist. In my reading, I suggest that these texts are informed by Herman Melville's considerations of—and anxieties about—his gender privilege(s) within his household. During the 1840s and early 50s, while Melville was writing his novels and short stories, his sisters and wife did all the revising and preparation for printing. Lizzie, Helen and, especially, Augusta were responsible for the immense task, the chore, of copying. So very busy was Augusta that Helen realized that the bonds of sisterly love could, or had, become chains of quasi-enslavement, as she phrases it in a letter to Augusta: "I can sympathise [sic] in your state of entire employment" (qtd. in Parker 2.221). Whether Augusta ever shared her brother's creative gift, talent, yearnings and literary aspiration, we will never know. Yet Augusta's letter to her friend Mary Blatchford may be pertinent here: "I really believe that I could at this moment indite a sonnet" (17 October 1850; qtd. in Parker 1.786). If she did ever have the time to write, her work was never printed. Was Herman Melville himself unaware of that potential in Augusta and perhaps his other sisters? Was he not conscious that, if it existed, it was being sacrificed in their becoming mechanical copyists? Contemplating Herman Melville's necessary awareness of female sacrifice invites an understanding of the story "Bartleby" according to which Herman Melville may not identify only with the scrivener but also—uncomfortably—with the lawyer. Events for the year 1853 suggest parallels between his sister's work and his works: "Melville apparently wrote 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' between mid-August and . . . mid-September. Augusta recorded no letters written between 6 and 24 August, a possible indication that she was copying furiously" and possibly an indication that the story reflects on her copying (Parker 2.176). I therefore read "Bartleby" in the light of another Melville text, "The Tartarus of Maids" (1855), which also refers to the material conditions of writing. In his visit to remote paper mills, the narrator of the story realizes how women are the victims of the social division of labor, a partitioning which condemns them to produce paper—as women—while it prevents them—as women—from having agency and visibility in writing. Melville's texts show how (male) publication may often come at the

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EXTRACTS of the non-writing of women, whose yearning to say will go silenced and disappear in the materiality of texts written by men. My reading of the stories contests David Leverenz's thesis that the American Renaissance male writers suffered severe

psychological hardships because they saw themselves as deviating from the gender expectations about the type of activity appropriate to male Brahmins. Melville may not have seen his masculinity with anxiety because of any deviance from gender expectations in the America of the 1840s and 50s, but rather, on the contrary, with the anxiety of knowing gender as the grantor of undeniable privileges for male writers of his times.

If as feminist criticism allows us to talk about the politics of masculinity, or masculine identity formation, or sexuality, we've got an embarrassment of riches in Melville. But insofar as feminist criticism devotes itself to representations of women, or representations of "women's" worlds and work, we appear to have little to go on. Shortly before Melville's death, Julian Hawthorne insisted that his father's one-time friend "wrote books that were certainly not meant for women," calling them, first, "Man-Books" and then, in a diminishing amendment, "books of adventure—boys' books" (Leyda, Log 2.810). In this remark, Hawthorne appears to some extent to be taking Melville at his own word, as in his well-known letter to Sophia Hawthorne, who had read and praised *Moby-Dick*: "It really amazed me that you should find any satisfaction in that book," Melville writes; "It is true that some men have said they were pleased with it, but you are the only woman—for as a general thing, women have small taste for the sea. . . . But, My Dear Lady, I shall not again send you a bowl of salt water. The next chalice I shall commend, will be a rural bowl of milk" (Correspondence 218-19). The "rural bowl of milk" refers, of course, to *Pierre*—a book that many have seen as demonstrating, spectacularly, Melville's inability to write coherently, or with conviction, about the family, about domestic structures, about conventional marriage, or successfully to adopt and adapt the (feminized) sentimental form. Regardless of whether he writes "Man" or "boy-books," however, Melville still gives feminists something to do. If we have been slow to recognize, and then to reckon with, this—as our panel's winking title suggests—there is reason to hope that the critical landscape is changing. and *Women*, the first collection of essays dedicated to the subject. Including essays treating Melville's lived relationships with women and his reading of women writers, his explicit renderings of female characters and his often more implicit and "slant" exploration of gender roles and domesticity, the collection breaks a path through largely uncharted and promising terrain. It is this path that our session attempts to follow, marking out three various but related approaches to reading Melville through a feminist lens.

Taken together, these approaches open up what we might think of as a new, more narrow avenue of exploration: Melville and the family. This thematic link appears as a common denominator of all three papers, family and, in particular, sisters: the sentimental sisters from whom Wellingborough Redburn flees, the sister-mother and sister-wife of *Pierre*, the copyist sisters in Melville's own life. Directly (Engholm and Andrés) and indirectly (Levy), our panelists have provided ample evidence that, whether focusing on male or on female characters, Melville is almost always talking about families—biological and contractual, sympathetic and antipathetic. We could supplement their analyses by thinking about how family is read and reframed through, to cite just a few examples, Tommo and Toby, Redburn and Harry Bolton, Ishmael and Queequeg, the "bachelors" and "virgins" of "Paradise" and "Tartarus," the waiting wife in the unfinished *Agatha* narrative. In short, our panelists make it apparent that, by reading Melville's work through the lens of the nineteenth-century family, whether real or imagined, we find the rich piece of

common ground between Melville and “the feminist” to which our panel’s title hopefully alludes.